



King County

Metropolitan King County Council

STAFF REPORT

Proposed No.:	2023-0002	Name:	Mary Bourguignon
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SUBJECT

Proposed Ordinance 2023-0002 would change the requirements for the retired van grant program to allow organizations applying for a van to transport supplies to people in need in addition to transporting people directly.

SUMMARY

Since 1995,¹ the Council has worked with Metro to grant retired vans from Metro’s vanpool program to nonprofit organizations and local governments that serve low-income, seniors, or young people or people with disabilities.

A description of the retired van grant program, including requirements for the use of the vans, was incorporated into the King County Code in 2006.² One of the requirements of the program is that agencies applying to receive a van must state “specific plans for use of the van to transport low-income, seniors or young people or people with disabilities.”³ (Emphasis added)

To ensure the health and safety of staff and clients during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Council approved Ordinance 19241, which allowed that, during the declared pandemic emergency, organizations could use their vans either to transport people in need directly or to deliver needed goods and supplies, such as food, clothing, and school and medical supplies, to low-income, seniors or young people or people with disabilities.

Proposed Ordinance 2023-0002 would make this flexibility permanent, by removing references to the emergency declaration from this section of the King County Code. As a result, applicants for a van would be able to provide their plans to use the van either to transport low-income, seniors or young people or people with disabilities OR to transport “goods or supplies, including but not limited to food, clothing, school supplies or medical equipment, to serve the needs of low-income, seniors or young people or people with disabilities.” There are no regulatory or funding issues with this proposal.

¹ The program started with a proviso in Ordinance 11578, Section 114. The program’s description and requirements are at KCC 4.56.100.E.

² Ordinance 15546 as amended by Ordinances 18777 and 19241, KCC 4.56.100.E

³ KCC 4.56.100.E.3

BACKGROUND

King County Metro Vanpool Program. Metro operates a commuter vanpool program as an alternative mobility service for individuals who don't have convenient bus service between home and work. Vanpools range in size from five to 15 riders. Each group has at least two volunteer drivers, plus a bookkeeper to track mileage, ridership, and fares. Fares are based on mileage, number of riders, and size of van. Vans are kept at a driver's house and riders usually meet at a Park & Ride, with each group determining its own route, parking, and operating rules.⁴

Metro sets fares for the program (which are often subsidized by employers) to recover 100 percent of the program's direct costs and at least 25 percent of the indirect and administrative costs.

Use of the vanpool program declined significantly during the pandemic, as many commuters worked from home in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the Council's deliberations on the 2023-2024 biennial budget, Metro indicated that, as of July 2022, there were 650 vanpool groups, down from 1,650 in 2019. Metro stated that, based on its projections, 750 to 1,000 vanpool groups will be in operation by the end of the biennium.

Metro stated that it is focusing on how to transform the vanpool program to meet the changing needs of customers. The adopted 2023-2024 budget⁵ includes \$550,000 to support marketing, education, and awareness efforts focused on rebuilding ridership for the vanpool program, with a focus on priority populations. New proposed pilots will test mobility rideshare solutions for specific transportation challenges resulting from changing commute patterns and new markets emphasizing support for priority populations not well-served by fixed route transit. Metro states that the goal is to fill commute and community travel gaps for essential, shift, manufacturing, and low-wage workers, students, refugees, working parents/caregivers and low-income families. Metro is also focusing on transitioning to zero-emission vehicles for the program.

Grants of Retired Vanpool Vans. The grants of retired Metro vanpool vans to serve those in need began with a proviso in the adopted 1995 County budget. That proviso required Metro to "provide without charge at least four vanpool vehicles... for use by non-profit agencies exclusively for the purpose of transportation of low income clients."⁶

A description of the program, including requirements for the use of transferred vans, was incorporated into the King County Code in 2006.⁷

The program has grown over the years, following the growth of Metro's vanpool program. In recent years, there have been 36 vans available to be granted, four designated by each Councilmember. (In 2023, the number of vans available is still being

⁴ Overview of Metro Vanpool Program: <https://kingcounty.gov/depts/transportation/metro/travel-options/rideshare/programs/vanpool.aspx>

⁵ Ordinance 19546

⁶ Ordinance 11578, Section 114

⁷ Ordinance 15546 as amended by Ordinance 18777, KCC 4.56.100.E

determined, both because Metro has not purchased new vans since 2019 due to the impacts of the pandemic and also because Metro is managing its vanpool fleet differently as it begins the transition to zero-emission vehicles.) Each year, the Council grants the vans by motion to non-profit organizations or local governments based on the following criteria, which are set out in the King County Code:

- The capacity to support ongoing van operation, including assured funding for licensing, insuring, fueling, and maintaining the van;
- Ability to provide qualified and trained drivers;
- Specific plans for use of the van to transport low-income, seniors, or young people or people with disabilities, and assurance that the use shall be available to those persons without regard to affiliation with any particular organization; and
- Geographic distribution of the van allocations in order to address the mobility needs of low-income, seniors, or young people or people with disabilities countywide.⁸

Requirements for the vans to be granted are based on the criteria listed above, which were set by the Council. There are no federal or state requirements for the use of these vans, as these vans have fulfilled their service obligations, have been retired, and would otherwise be sold as surplus.

Temporary pandemic change to requirements. The 2020 application process for Metro's retired vans began in January 2020, before COVID-19 had been declared a health emergency in the United States. The application process concluded, and van grants were made⁹ during the early months of the pandemic, when public health officials and local organizations were still attempting to determine how long the pandemic would affect daily living conditions and what precautions should be put in place to ensure public health and safety.

As the pandemic continued, following guidance from local, state, and national public health agencies regarding employee and passenger safety, local organizations that serve people in need made significant operational changes. Many organizations stopped or limited transporting clients to needed services, instead bringing services and supplies to their clients, by providing virtual services to the extent possible and by delivering needed goods and supplies, such as food, clothing, school supplies, and medical supplies to clients' homes.

In recognition of these changes, in 2021, the Council approved Ordinance 19241, which changed the requirements for agencies applying to receive a van during the declared pandemic emergency. This temporary change allowed applicants for a van to provide their plans to use the van either to transport low-income, seniors or young people or people with disabilities OR, for the duration of the public emergency as set by the County Executive's proclamation, to transport "goods or supplies, including but not limited to food, clothing, school supplies or medical equipment, to serve the needs of low-income, seniors or young people or people with disabilities."

⁸ KCC 4.56.100.E

⁹ Motion 15646

ANALYSIS

The increased flexibility for the use of vans granted through the Council van grant program, which has been provided through Ordinance 19241, will expire upon the termination of the Executive's COVID-19 emergency proclamation. Proposed Ordinance 2023-0002 would make this increased flexibility permanent.

It would allow van applicants to state their plans either to transport low-income, seniors or young people or people with disabilities directly or to transport goods or supplies to low-income, seniors or young people or people with disabilities.

Metro staff have indicated that Metro has no issues with the proposed legislation. Because the vans to be transferred will have been formally retired and are thus available to be removed from transit service and surplus, there are no state or federal funding implications regarding the allowed uses of these retired vans. If the Council approves Proposed Ordinance 2023-0002, Metro will update the application materials for the 2023 van grant program to incorporate this change to the requirements.

The process of reviewing and approving Proposed Ordinance 2023-0002 and incorporating the change in requirements into the application materials may delay the start of the 2023 van grant application process but would be intended to make the requirements to apply to receive a van applicable to a wider range of eligible organizations.